Multi-level Contextual Factors and L2 Writing Teachers' Assessment Conception and Practices in Iran

Masoumeh Tayyebi [1] iD *, Mahmoud Moradi Abbasabady[2*]* iD *, &*
Gholamreza Abbassian[3] iD

Abstract

Writing assessment literacy (WAL) for second or foreign language (L2) teachers, which refers to teachers' knowledge, conceptions, and practice of writing assessment in L2 contexts, has lately received attention from scholars. Although there has been significant debate about the impact of contextual and conceptual factors on teachers' assessment literacy, studies focusing on how such factors influence teachers' WAL are lacking. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the way Iranian English writing teachers' conception of assessment, and macro, meso, and micro contextual variables, impact their writing assessment practice. It also looked at how writing teachers make assessment decisions in order to negotiate and find a compromise when their assessment views and beliefs diverge from the assessment policies in their local contexts. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten in-service L2 writing teachers in Iran. The findings show that participants had positive conceptions about formative writing assessments, but they stated that they mostly used summative assessments in writing classes. Macro-level contextual factors turned out to mostly impact teachers' writing assessment practices and conceptions. The results underscored the role of school and work experience in shaping and

[1] PhD Graduate of TEFL from Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch and a Faculty member, Islamic Azad University, Savadkooh Branch, Mazandaran, Iran
Email: Tayyebi.masoumeh@gmail.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4199-4967
[2] Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor in TEFL, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran
Email: moradi@umz.ac.ir, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5517-3361
[3] Associate Professor in TEFL, Imam Ali University
Email: gabbasian@gmail.com, ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1507-1736

changing writing assessment conceptions. The findings of this study contribute to our current understanding of WAL development and the provision of more efficient assessment training for language teachers in teacher education programs.

Keywords: writing assessment literacy**,** assessment practice, assessment conception**,** macro/ meso/micro contextual factors

1. Introduction

Written English is increasingly seen as an independent skill in the classroom in various L2 contexts and contributes more than ever to students' educational and professional achievements (Cumming, 2001; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). As a greater number of people bond together via writing, writing pedagogy as well as assessment takes on a significant role in L2 contexts (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Good assessment practices are indispensable to the teaching of L2 writing (Crusan et al., 2016). As part of their profession, L2 writing teachers are regularly required to assess students' writing in the classroom (Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Hyland, 2003). Therefore, they are required to have a solid grasp of WAL, which is defined by Crusan and her colleagues (2016) as L2 writing teachers' knowledge, conception, and practices of assessment in the classroom. They maintained that teachers' assessment practices are impacted by assessment contexts and teachers' experiences and learning. These factors affect teachers' assessment decision-making with regard to what to do in the classroom and how to do it. Taking a sociocultural view towards assessment literacy (AL), Crusan and her colleagues (2016) moved away from componential views of AL which only emphasized the clarification of components of assessment knowledge base that teachers needed to be familiar with in order to be considered assessment literate (e.g. Brindley, 2001; Davies, 2008) and embraced the multi-dimensional views of AL that holds that teachers' AL is shaped by continual interactions among various factors, including assessment knowledge, assessment conceptions, assessment practice, and assessment context (Crusan et al., 2016; Fulcher, 2012; Scarino, 2013; Xu & Brown, 2016). Teaching pre-service teachers about the knowledge components of AL in teacher education programs does not make them assessment literate because the transfer of teachers' assessment knowledge to the practical domain is not assured. Assessment knowledge is a required but not sufficient prerequisite for teachers' AL development. The acquisition of assessment knowledge content delivered in a teacher training course does not guarantee pre-service teachers' AL development unless this content is intertwined with their existing knowledge and conceptions (Crusan et al., 2016). Teachers have their own distinct conceptions with regard to assessment that act as an interpretive mechanism and influence their uptake of assessment knowledge (Brown, 2008; Hill et al., 2010; Scarino, 2013). Moreover, serving teachers are not

free to conduct whatever assessment practices they wish, as contextual variables in the workplace set boundaries for their assessment practices in the context of the classroom (Gu, 2014; Xu & Liu, 2009; Xu & Brown, 2016). Teachers may be forced to engage in assessment practices that are inconsistent with their views and values. To explain the complex relationships among teachers' assessment conceptions, knowledge, and their assessment practices, Fulmer and his colleagues (2015) presented a multi-level model of contextual factors that may influence teachers' assessment practices. They specified three categories of contextual factors, namely macro-, meso-, and micro-factors that may influence teachers' AL. The macro contextual factors are related to broad national and cultural impacts on teachers' assessment practices. The meso-level factors are factors at the institutional or school level that can directly influence teachers' assessment practice. The micro-level factors are those factors in the immediate context of classrooms, including teachers' and students' background features. Altogether, these macro-, meso-, and micro-level contextual factors create an assessment culture that contributes to the shaping of teachers' conceptions as well as practice of assessment. Within this contextualized view, teachers' WAL may develop, change, or remain static depending on the context of practice and teachers' conceptions. While teachers are required to attain sufficient writing assessment-based knowledge, they have to make informed decisions when confronted with complex contextual factors that may assist or impede their practices. (Xu & Brown, 2016; Xu, 2019). Consequently, WAL development is not just the acquisition of knowledge about writing assessment, but also how teachers make appropriate decisions to reconcile the demands of the local context in which they are working and their own belief system regarding L2 writing assessment.

While the significance of L2 teachers' WAL in students' writing achievements has been acknowledged (Crusan, 2010; Lee, 2017; Weigle, 2007), few studies have addressed Iranian L2 Teachers' WAL (Ataie-Tabar et al., 2019; Soltanpour & Valizadeh,2019). To the best of our knowledge, studies that closely examine how Iranian L2 teachers' conceptions of L2 writing assessment impact the way they practice assessment in writing classes are lacking. Moreover, there is no evidence on how multiple contextual factors influence teachers' assessment practices. Since teachers' WAL is shaped by various contextual and experiential elements (Carless

2005; Yung, 2002), conducting a study that thoroughly addresses how these contextual factors may influence teachers' writing assessment practices and how they struggle to align assessment for learning (AfL) with assessment of learning (AoL) would be significant, considering the dominance of exam-driven practices in Iran. For these reasons, the purpose of this study is to answer these questions:

(1) How do multi-level contextual factors impact L2 writing teachers' classroom assessment practice in Iran?

(2) How do conceptions of writing assessment influence L2 writing teachers' classroom assessment practice?

(3) How do L2 writing teachers make assessment decisions to balance the demands of contextual factors with their own assessment conceptions?

2. Literature Review

Despite the fact that assessing students' writing accounts for a significant portion of writing teachers' responsibilities, L2 writing assessment has had a low profile as a component of teacher education programs (Crusan, 2016; Dempsey et al., 2009; Hirvela & Belcher, 2007; Wiegle, 2007). As a result, many L2 teachers consider assessment as a "necessary evil" (Weigle, 2007, P.194) rather than a critical component of instruction that benefits both teachers and students. The primary focus of L2 writing research has been on student-related issues, and writing teachers are rarely mentioned in these studies (Hirvela & Belcher, 2007); thus, studies on teachers' classroom assessment literacy in L2 writing have been slow in progress (Lee, 2017). In this regard, Crusan et al. (2016) investigated L2 instructors' writing assessment knowledge, conceptions, and practice, finding that teachers lack confidence and theoretical knowledge in properly assessing student writing. They also found that teaching context had an impact on teachers' assessment literacy and assessment philosophy. Specifically, they found that teachers who had heavier teaching loads had more negative views of assessment. Lam (2019) also studied L2 writing teachers' knowledge, conceptions, and practice in Hong Kong and found that most participants had basic assessment knowledge and held positive conceptions about alternative

writing assessments. The impact of contextual factors on teachers' AL has been confirmed in some recent studies (Tao, 2014; Yan et al., 2018). While these studies addressed the mediation of contextual factors in teachers' assessment practices, the categories of context that develop from these studies are not distinct and clear-cut. Yan et al. (2018) recognized the negative effect of exam-oriented educational assessment policy on teachers' assessment practices. They argued that assessment training for language teachers should take into consideration the assessment context in order to decide on appropriate training materials and utilize proper training methods.

Since English education in Iran is centered mainly on grammar and reading comprehension (Riazi, 2005), L2 writing instruction in secondary and tertiary education has a history of neglect and even if conducted in some contexts such as in private institutes or in English -major curricula, it generally follows a product approach in which students generally write their assignment at home and the only feedback they receive is a grade with minimal comments on final drafts (Naghdipour, 2016). As a result, L2 writing instructors develop traditional conceptions of writing assessment and do not generally have their own experiences of alternative L2 writing assessment to draw upon in assessing L2 writing. With regard to the L2 teachers' training program, there is a generic assessment course which is not sufficient to make would-be teachers assessment literate in writing assessment. Previous studies revealed that L2 writing teachers lack competence and preparation for conducting writing assessments in the classroom. Nemati et al. (2017), for example, studied Iranian teachers' writing assessment capacity and their views and practices of written corrective feedback and concluded that teachers did not have satisfactory writing proficiency, and their writing assessment ability was not acceptable. Soltanpour et al. (2019) explored writing assessment knowledge, beliefs, and training experiences and the needs of TEFL-majored and non-TEFL-majored Iranian EFL teachers and observed that the correlation between the teachers' majors and prior writing assessment training was significant. Ataie-Tabar et al (2019) found that Iranian EFL teachers have problems in taking a sociocultural approach to writing assessment in classrooms and need to receive more training about student-centered writing assessment. The above-mentioned studies on WAL in Iran were mainly concerned

with the knowledge component of WAL, and the mediation of conceptual and contextual factors on writing assessment practice has not been addressed. Despite teachers' lack of appropriate writing assessment knowledge, writing has turned into an important contributing factor in Iranian students' academic and professional life and builds up an impassable barrier to students and professionals who need to take high-stakes English proficiency tests like international tests of TOEFL or IELTS or need communicative mastery of English skills in order to publish high-quality scientific papers in English medium journals. Overall, the mismatch between writing requirements at school or university and students' real-life writing requirements has created a difficult situation for L2 teachers and students that calls for immediate action (Marefat & Heydari, 2018). In view of these justifications, investigating L2 writing teachers' conceptions of writing assessment, the adequacy of teacher education programs to address writing assessment, teachers' implementation of writing assessment, and existing obstacles to the implementation of their ideal writing assessment can provide rich data to improve the quality of teacher education programs.

3. Methodology

The present study is a qualitative study that aims to gain in-depth and reflective information about L2 writing teachers' conceptions and practices of writing assessment. The participants included 10 L2 writing teachers selected through convenience sampling and individually participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews were audio-taped with participants' consent. All the participants were native speakers of Persian within the age range of 29-54. Two of the participants had an MA degree, two were PhD candidates, and the remaining six had a PhD degree in TEFL. They have been teaching writing at universities, private institutes, or both in Iran for at least four years. All of them had passed a general testing and assessment course and an academic essay writing course during their undergraduate and graduate studies, but none of them had attended a course or workshop on writing assessment. The participants' profiles are shown in Table 1. An interview protocol consisting of nine questions was developed to generally

frame the interviews (Appendix A). The questions were referred to two assessment experts in the field and were checked to ensure that they were compatible with the aim of the study. The first question elicited basic information about the interviewees, such as their age, educational degree, writing courses they had taught, and years of experience. The remaining eight questions were related to their assessment conception and practices. The questions were piloted with two writing teachers to obtain an accurate understanding of the clarity of the questions. The feedback from the piloting was related to some wording problems. The feedback was used to revise the questions, making them clear and unambiguous. Throughout each interview, the interviewer adhered to the protocol in order to make use of all the guiding questions. Sometimes the interviewer had to ask some additional questions because the response the participant had given was not clear or elaborate enough. Thematic analysis was used to code the data (Creswell, 2007). The initial action to take following the interviews was to listen to and transcribe the recorded interview files. When finished, a coding process was implemented for the data in order to extract the common patterns and themes. First, a preliminary analysis was conducted so that the researcher could get a general sense of the data. Then, the data coding was performed. In the coding process, the data was carefully read, and then the texts were divided into segments, which were subsequently coded. To address the issue of reliability, all the interviews were recorded with the participants' consent so that no point in the interviewees' statements would be missed, and the interviewer also took notes to assist her in keeping track of the talk and enabling her to ask further questions where there was a misunderstanding. To ensure the consistency of the analyses, the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed separately by two coders. All the textual raw data were meticulously read to find related ideas and group these ideas under overarching categories, and then look for recurring themes or patterns among the categories. Then a coding scheme was developed to categorize the themes and sub-themes. Despite the fact that manual analysis is time-consuming, it allowed the researcher to acquire a thorough grasp of the developing content/themes. When the initial coding scheme was designed, the researcher applied the coding scheme to all the data. The coding scheme underwent some rounds of changes and revisions in the process of coding. At the final stage, the two coders compared their codes and discussed discrepancies in their codes until consensus on all the codes was achieved.

Table 1.
The Participants' Profiles

Name	Degree	Gender	Age	Course taught	experience	Place of work
Teacher 1	PhD	Male	44	Advanced writing Essay writing Academic writing	9	university
Teacher 2	PhD	Male	43	IELTS, academic articles, and general English writing	20	Language Institute
Teacher 3	PhD candidate	female	29	Letter writing	4	University
Teacher 4	MA	male	37	Essay writing	18	Both
Teacher 5	PhD	male	44	IELTS and TOEFL writing, essay writing, Advanced Writing, General English writing	16	Both
Teacher 6	PhD	Male	36	IELTS essay writing, Letter writing, Academic Writing, and General English writing	18	Both
Teacher 7	PhD candidate	female	42	General English writing	14	Language institute
Teacher 8	MA	female	34	Advanced writing, General English writing	5	Both
Teacher 9	PhD	male	40	Advanced writing, essay, and letter writing	13	University
Teacher 10	PhD	male	54	Advanced writing, essay, and letter writing	20	University

The data from the interview were examined through an inductive approach, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2010). To

ensure the consistency of the analyses, the interview transcripts were manually coded and analyzed separately by two researchers. The researchers read all the raw textual data to find related ideas and group these ideas under overarching categories, and then look for recurring themes or patterns among categories. The coding scheme was developed to categorize the themes and sub-themes. The coding scheme underwent some rounds of changes and revisions in the process of coding. Then, the two researchers compared the codes and discussed discrepancies in their codes until consensus on all the codes was achieved.

4. Results

To answer the first question, which was related to the impact that contexts have on teachers' writing assessment performance, the interview data were analyzed, and three categories of contexts were identified, as shown in Table 2.

4.1. Contextual Mediating Factors

4.1.1. Micro-level factors

Three recurring themes in the interview data connected to the immediate context of the classroom were teachers' lack of proper writing assessment knowledge as novice teachers, students' lack of motivation, and large class size. All participants admitted that when they started their teaching career, they knew nothing of writing pedagogy and assessment. They agreed that they did not receive proper and practical assessment training in general and in writing assessment in particular throughout their teacher education programs, and they had to learn writing instruction and assessment on their own through trial and error. Their writing assessment was guided by two sources: their own school or undergraduate writing courses, and on-the-job experience. They stated that their experience as student had a significant influence on their approach to writing assessment, particularly in the earlier years of their teaching career. Highlighting the inadequacy of teacher education programs, they stressed the necessity for the provision of a stand-alone L2 writing pedagogy and assessment course that would offer student-teachers in-depth and thorough explanations of writing instruction and assessment issues.

Table 2

Emerged Categories, Subcategories, and Themes from Semi-Structured Interviews with the Teachers

Category	Sub-category	Main Theme
1-Contextual Factors	1. Micro-level	a. Lack of AfL knowledge i. Improper training in teacher education b. Students' lack of motivation c. Class size
	2.Meso-level	a. schools' assessment attitudes b. Lack of resources I. In-service teacher development course ii. Lack of enough funds iii. Lack of access to a computer and applications
	3. Macro-level	a. Examination-oriented national policy b. Insufficient curricular time
2-Conceptions	1. Formation	Apprenticeship of observation
	2. Change	Work experience
3-Decision-making	1. Compromise	
	2. Compliance	

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 7]

When I was a BA student, my writing teacher in the advanced writing course just wrote a topic on the board and asked us to write an essay either in or out of class. He would hand in the draft with a grade at the bottom with some ambiguous written comments. When I became a writing teacher, I modelled after my teacher, thinking to myself that it was the best method ever

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 10]

In our writing class, we did not know what we were supposed to do. There were no criteria or standards to follow. As a novice teacher, I did exactly the same. It took

me several years to learn about brainstorming and providing assessment criteria.

　　[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 4]

　　We needed a separate assessment course that would involve actual writing assessment experiences and necessitate more reflective practices and training in the practical and theoretical aspects of writing and writing assessment. I think during our education, we should be involved in actual assessment practices, preparing tasks, and giving feedback and scores.

　　[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 3]

　　A very short period of time was spent on writing, about one session or so. I had passed a general assessment course during my BA, MA, and PhD programs, but that course focused on a lot of different issues, and I don't remember anything focusing specifically on writing assessment. It was not enough, and we needed more time to study writing issues in depth.

The majority of participating writing teachers tended to maintain and use the type of assessment approaches they had received as undergraduate students, even if their experience was not good. The participants stated that as they expanded their teaching and assessing repertoire, they got to learn about process writing, multi-drafting, and the significance of providing appropriate feedback instead of ambiguous comments at the bottom of students' assignments, which was quite a common practice in writing classes in L1 and L2. Although they had made some amendments to their assessment approach, they have continued to use the product approach to writing assessment due to challenges they face in implementing AfL methods.

　[Interview Excerpt 6: Teacher 7]:

　　In my undergraduate writing class, we didn't write in drafts. Our teacher wrote a topic on the board, and we were supposed to write about that topic. Most of the feedback we received was related to grammatical mistakes. As a novice teacher, I exactly copied those steps. And still, after 20 years of experience, I still follow those steps to some extent.

The second theme associated with classroom context was students' lack of motivation, which made the implementation of formative assessment challenging

and, at times, impossible. Students' poor motivation for writing was highlighted by participants in contrast to other language skills. Teachers associated this lack of motivation with the fact that students did not know how to write in their L1 in the first place. Because of negative experience with Farsi writing and a lack of attention to writing in the L2 curriculum throughout school, students get the perception that writing is less essential than the other language skills, especially speaking. Even in private institutions that claim to develop students' communicative competence in all four skills, writing is commonly the fourth and last language skill to be learned

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 7]:

As L1 students, we had quite negative views about Farsi composition classes. It was quite traditional and product-oriented, and we were required to write on a topic in one draft. Developing ideas and content was a horrible experience for me and my classmates.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher3]:

The educational system does not encourage students to think creatively or critically because they usually have to memorize their subjects. As a result, they are not skilled at generating content and developing ideas in Farsi. I remember myself as a student, I used to memorize some templates that I guessed would be used in the final exam.

Teachers' assessment practice was further hampered by overcrowded classes with students who had differential language competency.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 4]:

In my writing class, there are 38 students with varying levels of language proficiency. Given that I have a number of other classes, offering feedback and marking their assignments takes a lot of time. It is impossible to employ a process-based method in this class.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 5]:

I teach 16 hours each week as a full-time lecturer. Furthermore, due to low pay, I

teach more than 20 hours each week at a private institute. I can't use a multi-drafting and process method since I have so many teaching hours and so many pupils in class. Students dislike peer or self-assessment, so I use a product approach to cut down on paper correction time.

4.1.2. Meso contextual factors

At the institutional level, insufficient resources and schools' attitudes towards assessment were among the main issues that impact teachers' assessment practice.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 6]

I prefer using formative assessment to focus on providing information and feedback about students to help them grow and achieve their learning goals. The university regulations place a high value on assessing learning outcomes through scores. Because of that, students' attention is totally focused on the final and mid-term exam, and for every classroom activity, they would ask about their weights in the final score.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 9]

For graduate students, where the class size is manageable compared to undergraduate classes, I actually prefer to skip the final exam and replace it with some class projects and research papers. However, our university does not show any flexibility regarding the end-of-term exam. I believe that every academic institute should be granted more freedom in assessment policy and in conducting final exams.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 4]

I teach writing in IELTS preparation classes and I am supposed to cover the materials in 15 sessions according to the institute's regulation. So there wouldn't be any time to use multi-drafting techniques and students are not willing to do so because they prefer learning more important structures or ready templates, which increases their chance of passing the exam. Private classes and TOEFL or IELTS registration cost a fortune in Iran and many students are under financial pressure.

Participants said that they wished they had been provided with some in-service

training courses on writing assessment to refresh their knowledge of writing assessment theory and get updated on innovative assessment practices:

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 3]

I really need to review what I had studied in my PhD but I just do not have the time. I need an overview of L2 writing theories, conceptual definitions of the construct of writing, assignment design, and scoring.

In a like manner, participants complained that since in formative assessment, it is the writing process that counts, they need to go through several steps of assessment to modify students' drafts, so access to overhead projectors, computers, and some writing applications would reduce their workload.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 1]

Apps like Grammarly, Scribber, Screen Cast, or paraphrasing apps and sites that can facilitate the assessment process for teachers because in formative assessment, we have to assess one assignment several times that take up much time and energy. For example, ScreenCast enables the teachers to provide students with audio feedback so that the students understand the reason you gave a specific comment and feedback. But unfortunately, we don't have any access to these facilities.

4.1.3. Macro-level factors

At the macro national level, centralized education and exam-oriented assessment policy require all teachers to take summative assessment and provide numerical information at the end of the course. All interviewees stated that final exams had a significant influence on their assessment practice.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 9]

We are constrained by the quantification policy. This assessment policy requires giving a score to students written output. Final examinations have high stakes since students' graduation depends on their scores. So teachers are under pressure to teach to the test against their will in order to help students.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 4]

Definitely, the language policy in Iran counts a lot. So teachers like me are obliged toward that, i.e., exams. There is no alternative.

Another factor related to national policy that teachers mentioned was the ignorance of writing skill during secondary education and non-English major education that tend to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Even for English-majors, writing courses are included, there is a 2-unit credit writing requirement held once a week which by no means is enough considering the absence of writing during school.

4.2. Conceptual Factors

4.2.1. Early conception

Participants stated that the quality of writing instruction and assessment teachers had received as students shaped the way they viewed writing as a subject matter and the way they perceived themselves as writing teachers and assessors. Eight participants identified themselves as poor writers and two as moderate writers. The negative attitude they had was related to both writing as a subject matter and writing pedagogy and assessment.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 10]

I have never liked writing and never looked forward to teaching writing at all. I do remember that our writing class in L1 during elementary and high school was so boring and stressful. The teacher wrote a topic on the board and required us to write a page or two about that topic by the end of the class. It was very stressful as I was not creative at all and had no idea about the topic. In L2 writing course, the situation was not so different.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 2]

Writing courses in our BA programs were totally product-based: the teacher assigned a topic about which we wrote some paragraphs and teacher assigned a

numerical grade with some ambiguous comments in red which we did not understand.

4.2.2. Conception change

When discussing their own experiences of writing assessment development, the teachers reflected on their early assessment conceptions and the way they had changed as they grew more experienced. All ten participants concurred that as a result of repeated practice they had moved from atomistic view of writing assessment to more holistic approaches to writing assessment. The way they conceived writing assessment influenced the way they conducted assessment

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 1]

Initially I saw writing as a mechanical process of putting words and phrases together to build sentences and texts. Accordingly, I paid a great deal of attention to the well-formedness of the sentences that comprised the text (i.e. grammar and vocabulary was of extreme importance to me). However, through experience I realized that writing is like architecture in the sense that I need to do some planning before I actually begin writing. In other words, I realized that I needed to focus on the topic and the ideas that relate to the topic, decide which of those ideas to put in my writing and how to organize those ideas to achieve my communicative purposes more effectively.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 6]

When I first started assessing my students' writings I saw good writing as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. After I started teaching IELTS and academic writing, however, my changed and I realized that cohesion and coherence, task achievement and task response are important factors. I also help students correct their own mistakes rather than correcting them myself.

4.3. Teachers' Assessment Decision -Making

When asked how, in their assessment practice, they make decisions to take informed actions and if they make compromises to reconcile conflicts arising from their

conception of assessment and the institutional context, eight participants said although they favor formative assessment and they are confident in their ability to conduct formative assessment they surrender to national assessment mandate and take a totally summative approach to assessment

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 2]

"With tied hands, one cannot do anything but follow the mainstream."

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 5]

Since there is direct prohibition in the writing assessment programs, I always do whatever I am obliged to. I will do that even though they are at odds with my personal taste to the assessment procedure.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 4]

I like formative assessment. Definitely, what counts is the national language policy. So teachers like me have no choice. There is no alternative. I try to be conservative about that.

Only teachers 1 and 9 had different ideas in this regard trying to find a balance between their assessment conceptions and contextual challenges. While they stick to national regulations with regard to final exam, they also took a learning-oriented assessment by making every classroom activity and participation count toward the final grade so that students be motivated to participate in classroom activities. Consequently, the compromise they made was to implement classroom assessment with the accountability purpose.

[Interview Excerpt: Teacher 1]

I try to find a balance, incorporating both fronts. What I end up doing is employing my own ideas of developing writing skills during the term but allocating a third of the final score to formative assessment activities. I really wish I could increase the proportion of classroom assessments to 100% but unfortunately with the dominance of the national exam policy it is out of my hands.

5. Discussion

While the significance of WAL has been emphasized in the literature, little is known about the way L2 writing teachers' assessment practice are impacted by conceptual and contextual factors. This qualitative study therefore addressed this gap by examining the impacts of multi-level assessment contexts and teachers' assessment conception on the way writing assessment is practiced. It also examined the way Iranian EFL teachers make assessment decisions in their writing classes.

In line with Crusan et al.'s (2016) study, the present study recognized that assessment context mediates L2 writing teachers' assessment practice. It recommends that EFL teachers' WAL training needs is not just the development of knowledge base and writing assessment conceptions, practices, and contexts are equally important. The study also is in agreement with Yan et al.'s (2018) who argued that teacher educators in local contexts, need to scrutinize teachers' current assessment practices, understand how assessment policies and mandates mediate their assessment practice and conceptions, find the available resources for assessment training, and guide teachers through the stages of assessment development. Collectively, the results underscore the importance of considering diverse contextual and experiential factors when examining teachers' WAL. This aligns with broader perspectives in applied linguistics, particularly models like that of Pishghadam and Shakeebaee (2020), which emphasize the influence of various forms of capital—economic, cultural, emotional, and sensory—on language learning success.

 These findings contribute to our current understanding of WAL development and provide a more accurate picture of writing assessment training needs to develop more efficient assessment training for language teachers in pre-service teacher education or professional in-service training programs. Consistent with Ene and Hryniuk (2018), the findings of this study indicated that macro level national assessment policy most influenced the way writing teachers assess and perceive EFL writing. Participants identified the exam-based curriculum as a determining factor that shaped their assessment practices. As a result, writing assessment is mainly controlled by summative approach that focus largely on scores instead of feedback. Predominantly summative focus and a lack of formative feedback are unlikely to result in effective learning, making it difficult for students to generate autonomy in writing. With the

dominance of summative assessment, teachers tend to view writing as a product, paying little or no attention to the writing process.

Furthermore, the participants stated that their students' lack of motivation for AfL practices was due to the high stakes of exams, and that they would not engage in any activities if they were not included in their final test scores. Exam-driven education, they claim, encourage students to remain passive and undermines critical thinking and practical learning. It's no surprise that writing teachers and students can't focus on learning or critical thinking when test results take precedence over other elements in determining educational performance and effect students' advancement to the next level.

The undesirable experience with writing in L1 curriculum (Reichelt, 2005; Saeli & cheng,2019) and the ignorance of writing skill in L2 curriculum at school have shaped novice teachers' conceptions of writing as a demanding and unimportant language skill and writing instruction and assessment as a mechanical process of putting words together to build grammatically correct texts. The finding is in line with Phipps and Borg (2009) who stated that teachers' experience as learners and teachers shape their beliefs about teaching. Novice teachers are not devoid of attitudes and bring with themselves the experience of writing they had received throughout their school education as L1 and L2 students, which are going to play a significant role in their learning in teacher education courses (Street, 2003). These experiences are usually negative and if left unattended, influence the way teacher candidates are going to teach and assess (Morgan & Pytash, 2014). This situation is complicated by improper writing assessment training during teacher education courses. The interviewees indicated that none of them had received any training in writing assessment, which supports findings obtained by Crusan et al. (2016). They did not take any course on English writing assessment; rather, writing assessment was incorporated into the general testing and assessment course. In the absence of adequate training, all of the participants drew on their experience they had gained in writing assessment as students either in the L1 or the L2 curriculum. As Lortie (1975) stated, "pre-service teachers may draw upon their own apprenticeship of observation and apply the same kinds of instruction that they themselves had received as learners" (p. 39). The participants stated that as novice teachers, they imitated how they had

been assessed in their school or undergraduate writing classes which in their cases was totally product-oriented and summative-based. In fact, they didn't look into the reasoning behind their ideas and just copied after the approach they had been familiar with. To develop competency in writing assessment, student teachers require to receive appropriate training in various dimensions of writing assessment which cannot be addressed in general assessment courses as Crusan et. al. (2016) asserted:

Most importantly, however, the addition of a writing assessment component produces candidates more capable of serving students and colleagues via best practices in writing assessment". (Crusan et al. ,2016, P. 54).

Participants agreed that while they first conceived writing as a means of teaching and assessing grammar and vocabulary, as their understanding of writing instruction and assessment improved, their conceptions on writing assessment began to shift. This is in agreement with Sheehan and Munro who (2017) indicated that experience can even compensate for a lack of formal assessment education.

Despite the fact that teachers' perceptions and understanding of writing assessment evolved over time as a result of their experiences, most of them remained committed to a complete product-based approach and summative assessment due to the numerous contextual obstacles. Since educational system in general and ELT curricula are centralized in Iran, there is no room for local agency (Riazi, 2005). All pedagogical and assessment decisions with regard to regulations and standards, teacher training programs, curriculum and materials development, and funding and provision of facilities are determined by ministry of education. As a result, schools or universities lack any authority in assessment- related decisions and have no choice but strict compliance to summative end-of-the term examination. In this circumstance, it is apparent that the teacher's power to make certain decisions does not exist. While participants stated that they wish they could skip examination requirement especially for graduate students but they did not have the authority. Lack of enough facilities and resources was among the meso-contextual obstacles which was also reported in Naghdipour's (2016) who stated that that teachers of writing believe they are not ready to teach writing since they are unable to attend conferences or engage in professional development programs and they frequently work overtime

for extra income and engage in private teaching as a result of their low remuneration. As a result, they are hesitant to add to their outside-of-class workload by assigning additional writing that would need correction. Teachers' desire for a change of assessment practice is further stifled by crowded classes with students of varying competence levels, as well as restricted hours of teaching (usually two hours per week).

While the majority of participants valued formative assessment, only two participants practiced formative classroom-based assessment. This is in agreement with James and Pedder (2006), who indicated that while most teachers thought formative assessment was important, there was a discrepancy between what they thought and what they actually did. This discrepancy between what teachers claim to value and what they actually do is concerning because it suggests that there are more pressing demands on practice that override a widely held preference. Despite the fact that they knew summative scores alone could not be a reliable indicator of students' writing abilities, participants' assessment practices were determined by the examination guidelines and policy. They dared not risk student exam results in order to try out innovative assessments, such as AfL. Two of the participants who followed formative assessment approached classroom assessment with the accountability purpose, by taking some weight off the mid-term and the final exams and allocating it to learning-oriented assessments and involving students in the assessment process through self and peer assessment. As shown in Figure 1, based on the data we obtained in this study, national assessment policy, particularly exam-driven curriculum as a macro contextual factor, tends to overshadow meso and micro contextual factors as well as teachers' assessment conception in Iran. When teachers are required to provide numerical scores to students' assessments, both teachers and students prefer to focus on measurement aspects of assessment and neglect the learning sides of assessment. National mandate for conducting summative assessment leaves no room for institutions' and teachers' agency, while teachers as the main stakeholders in classroom, are required to be granted some degree of autonomy so that they can make their own assessment decisions and adjustments to meet the needs and demands of local assessment contexts. Since the main goal of learning is to pass examinations, teachers typically reduce their instruction to the tests

and emphasize the memorization of sample writing templates or grammatical structure. The goal of passing the exams drives teachers to take product-based approach to writing and to ignore important writing components like critical thinking, planning, receiving feedback, and reviewing.

Figure1
Relationship between Contextual Factors, Assessment Conceptions, and Assessment Practice
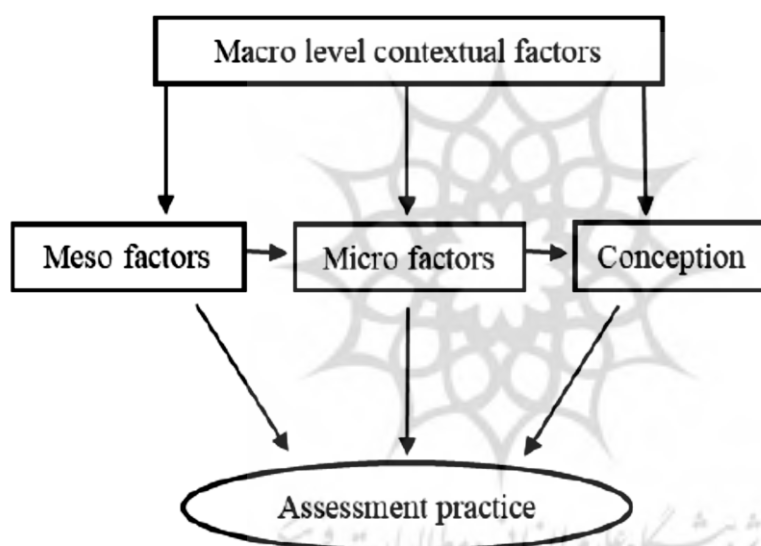
The present study is not exempt from limitations. The first problem is associated with research instrument which relied only interview data. Additional data could be contributing to attaining more detailed insights into the nature and understanding of WAL for in-service teachers. As such, future studies may use knowledge tests or observation data to provide a more comprehensive picture of the status quo of teachers' assessment practice and requirements. Yet another limitation in the study centers on small number of the participants which limits the generalizability of the results. Future studies may be conducted with samples of the larger population of writing teachers which are better representative of writing teachers.

5. Conclusion

Findings of this study provide insights into the multi-faceted nature of WAL and provide a more accurate picture of writing assessment training needs for the provision of teacher education programs or professional in-service training courses. It suggests that EFL teachers' WAL needs is beyond the development of a knowledge base of assessment during teacher education programs and should incorporate other components such as teacher conceptions of assessment, macro-, meso-, and micro contexts and the ability to make constant settlement for tensions among these components.

Along with changing needs of Iranian students and academics as regards to writing and the inadequacy of current writing pedagogy, steps should be taken to reexamine the L2 writing programs in Iran (Marefat & Heydari, 2018). Provisions for efficient teacher education and in-service professional development programs are among the steps that must be implemented. The current structure of L2 teacher education programs must implement significant modifications to its curriculum in terms of assessment in general and writing assessment in particular. As participants demanded maybe stand-alone courses that address both theoretical and practical aspects of L2 writing assessment need to be included in teacher education programs (Esmaeeli and Sadeghi, 2020). This resonates with findings from Burgess-Brigham, Eslami, and Esteki (2020), who showed that pre-service ESL teachers often feel underprepared to assess ELLs' reading abilities and benefit from explicit coursework and field-based experiences. Together, these studies suggest that pre-service teachers' assessment literacy—whether in reading or writing—requires systematic attention in teacher preparation programs.

The contextualized nature of WAL underscores the fact that WAL development is a collaborative activity that needs input and support from many stakeholders, such as students, school administrators, and policymakers and in order to enhance teachers' assessment literacy, other stakeholders, including policymakers, must be assessment literate. As Ruecker and Crusan (2018) stated assessment policies are frequently imposed on teachers and their classrooms by individuals who are not familiar with classroom settings, resulting in regulations that have a detrimental influence on the

teaching and learning process. Development of WAL will only be possible when in addition to teachers, all involved parties in language education come into play and work together. The study also highlighted the important contribution of teachers' conceptions in WAL development. Teacher educators need to be aware of the significance of Pre-service teachers' assessment conceptions and get them reflect on their conceptions on a regular basis and assist them to work against the undesirable effects of apprenticeship of observation. Summative examination-based education in Iran, with high stakes for low performance, has detrimental effects on both teachers and students, distorting the value of assessment. Without change at the macro-level in summative assessments, hardly change can be brought about in the assessment practices and conceptions at the institution level. Such a shift, of course, will necessitate a concerted and sustained effort from all stakeholders in the educational system, particularly the macro-level's role in providing the infrastructure for the incorporation of learning-oriented assessment.
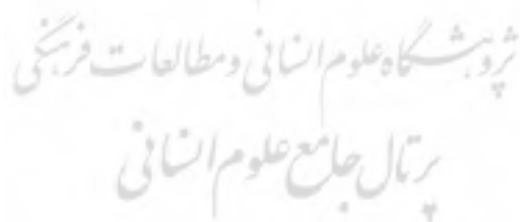
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About the Authors

Mahmoud Moradi Abbasabady, corresponding author, is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at the University of Mazandaran in Babolsar, Iran. He has published in both national and international journals, contributing to the field of applied linguistics. His primary research interests focus on second language (L2) assessment.

Masoumeh Tayyebi is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Savadkooh Branch in Mazandaran, Iran. Her research interests include second language writing, discourse analysis, and L2 teacher education. Dr. Tayyebi is actively engaged in academic teaching and research and has published and presented papers (inter)nationally.

Gholam-Reza Abbasian is an Associate Professor at Imam Ali University in Tehran, Iran. He teaches courses in language assessment, research methodology, and second language acquisition (SLA) at the PhD level. Dr. Abbasian has authored and presented several books, supervised numerous theses and dissertations, and published extensively in both national and international academic forums.
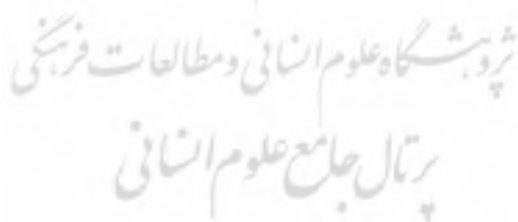
Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself.

2. How many years have you been teaching English writing?

3. During your studies at university what did you learn about writing assessment? what were typical requirements with regard to writing assessment?

4. In what ways university education did/didn't university education prepare you to assess students' writing?

5. Have you attended any professional training program on L2 writing assessment?

6. What were your views about writing assessment when you started your career? How did you get those views about writing assessment? If it had changed over the years as you gained more experience?

7. How do you usually assess students' writing? What is your ideal way to assess writing?

8. What were some problems you encountered while assessing students' writing that you wish you had learned at university?

9. What factors support or hinder your ideal assessment method? what do you do when your assessment views differ from national or institutional assessment policy?